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ABSTRACT

To make teachers of all subjects aware of the possible applications of international school correspondence, recommendations from teachers with a great deal of experience in this area are reported. Research shows that school correspondence can make a useful contribution to instruction concerning the language, culture, and civilization of everyday life in other countries. It can improve international understanding and bring together young people whom tradition, distance, and ignorance may have kept apart. There are two major sections to the guide. The first deals with correspondence between individuals, the second with group correspondence between classes. (RM)

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International School Correspondence
Teacher's Guide

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INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL CORRESPONDENCE TEACHER'S GUIDE

Research undertaken by the Secretary of FIOCES over a period of four years in various countries in Europe, Asia and America shows that school correspondence can make a useful contribution to instruction in the language, culture, civilisation or everyday life of other countries. Thus International School Correspondence plays its part in education for international understanding and brings together young people whom tradition, distance and ignorance may have kept apart. It also provides, for those pupils who for various reasons rebel at the traditional type of school exercise, a means of writing or expressing themselves orally (where spoken recordings on tape are also used). In this way a greater number of pupils are assisted in learning one or more of the languages of communication, including their own.

It seemed to us worthwhile to make teachers of all subjects aware of the possible applications of International School Correspondence and to provide them with some of the recommendations which have resulted from the long experience of their colleagues who have agreed to report on this subject.

The following pages could not have been written without the friendly collaboration of workers within the various International School Correspondence services who are members of FIOCES. We ask them to accept this as an expression of our thanks for the information and advice that they have kindly sent us by letter, or by contributions at our meetings held in London, Jaipur and Paris in 1977, 1978 and 1979

A Elmary,
Secretary of FIOCES
Paris 1 July 1980

Correspondence between individuals

This form of correspondence, which is the most widely used, is recommended by teachers for reciprocal linguistic and cultural advancement.

- for pupils studying a foreign language ;
- for pupils interested, for various reasons, in today's world.

In the first instance, the correspondence undertaken is said to be *bilingual*, as the two languages studied reciprocally are used in turn in letters exchanged. If there is an unequal use of the respective languages between the two correspondents as a result of their differing linguistic attainment, it would seem advisable that in every letter sent to a foreign partner both the maternal languages and foreign language should be used. The successful learning of a foreign language infers simultaneous progress at the level both of understanding and expression. If letters are written in both languages they favour this progress : reading and understanding a message received in the maternal language constitutes for the young foreigner an exercise in understanding which is always valuable, while the writing of a message in reply in a foreign language is an exercise in construction and written expression calling on all the pupil's linguistic skill and satisfies, more than the usual school exercise, the adolescent's motivation : curiosity where his equals in age and interest are concerned and a need to confide in and speak of his ideas, his hopes and fears, to someone whom he considers as a friend.

In the second case, the correspondence is described as *unilingual* because by agreement the correspondents use only one language, either the maternal or a second language with which the pupil is familiar by reason of study or daily use, as would be the case where young people come from a country where one of the main languages of communication is foreign but has nevertheless become a second means of exchange. This form of correspondence allows an exchange of ideas and information on subjects freely chosen by the participants : daily life or the political, economic or cultural aspects of their countries. If sport, cinema and pop music seem the favourite subjects of adolescents the world over, other subjects more or less futile (in the eyes of adults), or more or less serious also sometimes hold the attention and curiosity of the correspondents : the times we live in and the social and cultural milieu provide important variations.

These two forms of individual correspondence can lead, more often now than previously, to a meeting between the two partners, and the prospect of a stay in a foreign country at minimum cost, is often the essential motivation in seeking a correspondent in another country (especially in an adjacent country : Britain, for example, for the young French or Germans, or those countries which are fashionably exotic — Nepal or Thailand for young Europeans, or Sweden for young people from Africa). If the correspondence has been sufficiently fruitful and constant over a long enough period, and if the ties of friendship are really sincere, a meeting in the form of a homestay for one or other of the correspondents is sure to follow.

It should be ensured from the outset that conditions for a worthwhile correspondence are satisfied and the matched youngsters have the possibility of mutual understanding in spite of difficulties of language and cultural differences. The responsibility of teachers or correspondence agencies who have suggested the correspondence is very great. The success of the undertaking depends on the care taken in pairing the two foreign youngsters, and it is increasingly clear, where visits to the correspondent's family are concerned, that such care can prevent inconveniences arising from poor matching. It is desirable to gather as much information as possible to help promote these matchings — age, sex, family circumstances, importance of siblings etc. One would not, for example, introduce correspondents of different ages or of the sex not requested by the partner. As with other adolescent activities the emotional aspect should not be overlooked. An adolescent cannot be forced into taking part in such correspondence nor into accepting a particular partner. In both cases the choice is his — a choice and a decision which will often condition his perseverance and hence the success of the undertaking.

Before establishing a partnership it is as well to be sure that the respective parents agree to the aims and demands of this out-of-school activity, which requires a certain collaboration not least of a financial nature — the purchase of stamps, despatching of newspapers, documents and small presents and perhaps eventually welcoming the young visitor from abroad.

The exchange of international correspondence between individuals frequently moves away from the control of the teacher who set it up, particularly when adolescents of 13-14 years or more are involved who may not be keen on submitting letters received or to be sent to the critical eye of their teacher. The teacher can however contribute to the success of the correspondence by ensuring, at least in the early stages, that certain conditions are imposed and will be respected :

- correct reading of the name and address of the correspondent — not always easy with the differing styles between one country and another and the difficulties of deciphering a foreign handwriting.

- correct transcription of names and addresses into the pupil's exercise book and on to the envelope, which should be correctly stamped.
- in the case of bilingual correspondence, an even balance between the section of the letter written in the foreign language and that written in the maternal language.
- good handwriting and presentation of letters — often requiring a preliminary draft.
- the usefulness of keeping a copy (or the draft) of letters despatched in an exercise book kept for this correspondence. — questions and their answers will be retained within the pages, which can be illustrated with the photographs, postcards, drawings etc. received.

The teacher however can do more than give advice — advice which he should not hesitate to repeat in class whenever the occasion presents itself.

He can for example suggest his pupils ask their partners for information on specific subjects suitable to be studied in class. Letters received may be reproduced wholly or in part and analysed like any other text. Teachers stress the interest of this type of exercise which, while providing a change from ordinary classroom teaching — often based on the grammatical progression and vocabulary of the exercise book — illustrates the value of a document coming direct from a young correspondent.

The teacher may also suggest that his pupils write on these subjects in their own language, thereby preparing equivalent written material for use in similar classes in the other country. One cannot stress too much the value of this exercise, benefitting equally the writer and the receiver. Drafting a document for a foreign partner involves more than the usual school exercise in ' writing ', linguistic skill and effort on the part of the young correspondent. A certain discipline is required in order to make oneself clearly understood by someone with reading difficulties, requiring legibility and concise expression, and this may not be required of pupils in their normal school exercises. The mother tongue can thus also greatly benefit from International School Correspondence. As regards bilingual correspondence for linguistic progress, pupils may be encouraged to correct the sections of letters received written by the correspondent in the language of their partner, and this should, of course, be done on a mutual basis. The teacher may also suggest they point out to partners mistakes they have made in the script. From an analysis of these faults he should be able, at the right moment, to stress a point of syntax or vocabulary of the foreign language being studied.

Group Correspondence between classes

The same individual efforts of expression and documentation usually made out of school by youngsters invovled in foreign correspondence can be better and more completely accomplished within the framework of a *class link* organised by teachers and placed under their control. This form of group correspondence can transform an individual, out-of-school activity into an entirely scholastic undertaking, less susceptible than the former to the changing moods of the young people taking part.

However, the teaching most usually concerned in any correspondence programme with a linked class abroad is that of foreign languages. Language teachers in a variety of countries have been discovering over the years the great benefit to both their pupils and themselves of an exchange of letters and documents with young people abroad whose language they teach.

A class link results from an agreement between two teachers who are anxious to promote an exchange of correspondence and written and recorded texts specially prepared for the class in the other country for the benefit of their respective pupils. Without affecting any individual relationships which might arise during the school year among pupils of the two classes this form of school correspondence permits integration of most of the written and oral class exercises, whether in language instruction (foreign or mother tongue) or in the teaching of other subjects — history, geography, science — or even multidisciplinary studies (European studies, art, or the study of countries in the course of development).

Such exchanges bring to the foreign language class what may still so often be lacking — ideas which are concrete, experienced and authentic. Whatever the methods used, or the personal aptitude and initial training of the teacher, the teaching of a so called ' living ' language is always conducted by rather artificial methods which fail to convince the pupil for very long. Whatever names are given to the silhouettes which move across felt pictures or on the screens of the most sophisticated and up-to-date audio-visual equipment, whatever the quality of the voice transmitted from discs or tapes prepared by specialists in applied linguistics, such silhouettes and voices are but disembodied ghosts. Photographs, messages and written or recorded texts received from the partner class are quite another matter. For all their little imperfections they represent a reality which holds the attention, demands an interest and encourages the participation of the greater proportion of the pupils, even the less gifted and enterprising.

Teachers of foreign languages — and mother tongue teachers also — who have taken part in this form of group correspondence and who, at regular intervals, have transformed their classrooms into a club or workshop for foreign letter writing, all speak of the ' mobilising' aspect of this activity. Preparation of mail — letters, documents, small articles of craftwork destined for the partner class — is best performed in teams, preferably of not more than three or four pupils, and calls on all the skills, intellectual and manual, of the team members. Anticipation of a similar despatch in return from the partner class encourages the teams to continue outside the classroom the work begun during school hours.

The writing of personal or collective messages on various subjects suggested by the teacher is of course the essential task, but it can take quite varied and original forms. It is reported, for example, that the older pupils of a French lycée have produced a written questionnaire destined for their partners in a school in America concerning their tastes and interests, and also enquiring into their knowledge, interest or otherwise regarding important world events, statesmen, artists, scholars, etc. Similarly, we have heard of a group of senior pupils (16-17 years) in another lycée in France who have made a film about their school for their partner class in the U.S. A written commentary accompanies the film, illustrated with photographs, and the same commentary is recorded orally on tape*.

As with correspondence between individuals, both the languages being studied reciprocally should be used in any letter to the foreign partners ; if one wishes to receive messages written or recorded in the language being studied ' to see if one understands ' it is only fair to draft similar messages for the partner class. In such cases messages, written or recorded, would be limited to items which could be understood without any particular difficulty by the linked class whose ability to comprehend will have been assessed. This work will require particular care and, for the foreign class, will provide a sort of model. Thus poorly constructed writing, disregarding elementary rules of syntax of the native language, disjointed tape recordings which, out of context, are found difficult to understand, even for the native speaker, will be rigorously rejected by the teacher responsible for the despatch.

* These examples have been provided by Schools Correspondence (French Service), 29 rue d'Ulm, 75230 Paris Cedex 05, which each year welcomes teachers who organised class associations and receives reports on such arrangements and on the difficulties and benefits of this form of correspondence.

In a school where a teacher's only subject is the foreign language he should, for this aspect of the work, seek the collaboration of staff concerned with the mother tongue as well as those teaching history, geography and science who would be prepared to advise pupils when looking for and selecting documents to send to the linked class. Such cooperation among teachers of the same class creates a team spirit from which all subsequent educational projects will benefit — exhibitions, travel, expeditions and the reception of pupils from abroad. From the outset similar collaboration should be sought with the non-teaching staff and with the parents, bearing in mind possible developments from the class link (foreign travel of the pupils concerned and reception of the partner class).

The postal costs by ordinary mail or airmail — indispensable where frequent exchanges are required — inhibits the extension of this form of exchange incurring as it does certain expenses for which the school, the parents and the teacher must by some means accept the responsability. However bearing in mind that the Universal Postal Union has agreed printed paper tarifs for letters and documents addressed to schools abroad it is up to the teacher organising the exchange to arrange that the Headteacher puts his signature and the school stamp on packages addressed to the linked class abroad.

The significance and the form of letters and documents exchanged between two linked classes vary according to the age of the pupils and their aptitude for oral and written expression (in either language). For young pupils in the first or second year of instruction the teacher, in agreement with his foreign colleague, can proceed systematically suggesting, for oral and written messages in the native language, simple structures and alternative vocabulary which will provide the receiving class with a practical linguistic model. Exercises based on texts received from the foreign class will be normal for a language class — listening, repetition, transcription and substitution ; accompanying documents relating to the pupils (photographs of themselves, their houses, parents, town, school ; postcards, pictures, newspaper cuttings) may also be used, and can provide material for a permanent exhibition in the language classroom. Thus for each set of linguistic material received it will be possible to create the pictorial support necessary for its oral and visual rendering — the teacher can, for example, describe in the language studied a certain pupil whose photograph is on show and invite the class to pick him out from among all the other photographs displayed*.

* This suggestion appears in a report produced by a team of English teachers from the Somerset Language Centre for English/French Class Associations (documents provided by the Central Bureau for Educational Visits and Exchanges, 44 Baker Street, London W1H 2H.).

The value of class correspondence depends very much on the part played by the teachers who have set it up ; to be beneficial to the two classes concerned and to continue regularly throughout the year it is necessary, in the first place, that the two teachers lose no time in exchanging ideas on the running of the exchange and that agreement is reached on mailing dates. In the second place they should agree to oversee the quality and legibility of documents forwarded for which they are responsible. Unless the partner class or teacher request them, it seems unnecessarily costly to send off loads of unselected documents. As a general rule they should be sorted, selected or illustrated in a simple, attractive way according to the academic level of the class : the teacher's role in this area is vital.

During the exchange of letters and documents information on cultural differences between the countries may well be provided. Young adolescents are often astonished at their correspondents' habits of dress or eating, or at family, social or religious customs and, trapped by inherited ideas, are very quick to criticise. It is for the teacher to provide explanations, perhaps historical or economic, for cultural behaviour which is different from our own, leading to a more objective judgement of such customs which for all their strangeness possess nonetheless their own identity and value.